

Some Heroes Have Freckles

by Professor Perry Nodelman*
University of Winnipeg

When I asked my son Joshua, who is seven, what a hero was, he said, "I think a hero is somebody who saves the day. But I think it's always on TV, and it's usually cheap junk." His five-year-old brother Asa agreed with Josh's definition, but didn't share his disdain. He said, "A hero is a guy who saves people's lives and sometimes he crashes right into a building—like the Greatest American Hero crashed right into a train!" Alice, who is three and says she does not know what a hero is, nevertheless tells me that she will say the magic word and use her Goldilocks power to get rid of the bears under the piano. Products of an unheroic time, my children have never heard of any sort of heroes except the kind they see again and again on television.

I'm sure you're familiar with the type. The superhero, as he's usually called on Saturday morning cartoons and even on prime time live-action shows like *The Greatest American Hero*, is a dumb klutz with big muscles. You can tell he's dumb because he doesn't wear glasses like the villains do. You can tell he has big muscles because he hardly wears any clothes at all. Sometimes heroes are happy with just cowboy boots and a fur jockstrap, like ABC's *Thundarr the Barbarian*, who talks so slowly, with a pause in between each word, that you know nuclear physics is not his long suit; or like John Blackstar, the CBS Saturday morning astronaut who fell through a black hole into another universe, in which it is always too hot for a shirt. The TV superheroes who inhabit cooler climes spend their clothing budget on skintight Danskins, like Captain Marvel and Spiderman, or like Captain California of NBC's *Kid's Super Power Hour*. Dazzling in a skintight suit as his blue eyes, Capt. Cal rides his magic surfboard barefoot through the air, flashing his literally blinding smile at villains who need blinding. Other more humble heroes favor simple but nevertheless skintight blue jeans, like last year's Bo and Luke Duke and this year's Vince and Coy Duke, the apparently interchangeable Dukes of *Hazzard* on my children's current favorite TV show. The Dukes ain't too bright, but shucks, they're cute and they smile nice and they don't mean nobody no harm, and older people in looser clothing shouldn't get mad at them just because they have never heard of traffic regulations and seem to think that what they got handed when they passed their driving test was actually a pilot's license.

Superheroines are unlike superheroes only in their talent for assaultability; even the most super of supergirls needs a strong man to protect her. Firestar, whose essentially female superpower is getting hot on

*This paper was first delivered at Children's Book International 8, Boston Public Library, October 23, 1982, and published in the Library's *Proceedings of the Conference*, © 1983.

demand, is always being rescued by her male Amazing Friends, Spiderman and that really cool guy Iceman, and despite her vast riches, Goldie Gold can't do anything without the help of Action Jack, her poorer but maler friend. Both the cartoon Glorious Gal of the Kid's Super Power Hour and the theoretically real Daisy Duke of The Dukes of Hazzard do a lot of screaming and writhing while being clutched by bad men, an especially edifying sight when you consider that Glorious's neckline is probably a few inches lower than the bottom edge of Daisy's shorts. These ladies are just as bare, just as dumb, and almost as pretty as the fellows they hang out with.

Not so the bad guys. TV villainy almost always identifies itself by its love of learning, which has the effect of making you look more like Nodelman than Superman. It weakens your eyes, makes your hair fall out, and emaciates your limbs. Sometimes it makes you talk with a German accent, or even worse, an English one. Worse than that, it gives you big ideas about your own importance, and makes you want to take over the world. Worst of all, it makes you jealous of people with fewer years, bigger muscles, and cuter smiles than yourself. But in the long run, jealousy doesn't pay, and neither does thinking. On TV, the dumb youngsters and their glorious gals always triumph over their smarter but uglier enemies.

But it's always been like that. My children's heroes are the heroes we've always had. The Grimm brothers collected a vast array of stories about younger brothers called Dumbling or Simpleton or Lamebrain, all of whom manage to get more than they seem to deserve by the time their stories are over. A good example is the young hero of "The Golden Bird," who keeps refusing to do what a wise fox tells him to do, even though the first time he followed the fox's advice it worked out fine, and even though every time he does what he himself thinks is best he gets into even deeper trouble. As for fairy tale heroines, well, Little Red Riding Hood has so little in the brains department that her curiosity is not even aroused by the fact of a wolf talking. And when an eccentric lady pops out of the sky and tells Cinderella that the way to get to the ball is to go fetch a pumpkin and some mice, Cinderella's not too thoughtful response is, "Oh. Okay. If you say so." As if that weren't lack of character enough, there is Sleeping Beauty, who gets a prince by falling asleep, and Snow White, who gets one by actually enjoying housework and by falling asleep again and again and again. Fairy tale heroes and heroines are often just as young, just as gorgeous, and just as stupid as their contemporary TV counterparts. If we imagine them wearing less revealing clothing, it's merely because, once upon a time, Lycra hadn't been invented yet, and designer jeans were just a gleam in Rumpelstiltskin's eye.

Now these young, dumb heroes and heroines are *not* interesting people. If we relish Cinderella or the Duke boys, it's for what happens to them, not for who they are. It's the smart cat in the fancy footwear who's memorable, not the nebbish he gets the girl for; and I suspect that if we had the choice, most of us would rather be invited for dinner by Hazzard Country's sneaky Boss Hogg or Snow White's sneakier stepmother—or

maybe even, for the sheer thrill of it, by Jack's hungry giant—than by the uninteresting goops they make so much trouble for.

In fact, it's their lack of character, their resolute refusal to respond sensibly or forcibly to anything, that allows magic or interesting mayhem to happen to these young heroes and heroines. Fairy tales and their modern TV counterparts offer wish-fulfillment for powerless people—people who are asked to believe, by those older than themselves and richer than themselves and with more responsibilities than themselves, that they are too young and too poor and too dumb to deserve power. The downtrodden people who first told fairy tales told of downtrodden people who were satisfyingly, wonderfully victorious not because they were secretly as smart and as rich as their theoretical superiors, but because they were unthinking enough to accept magic and poor enough to need it. The heroes of these stories triumph not in spite of their inadequacy but because of it.

I suspect fairy tales and the TV shows modelled on them are popular with children for just that reason. For children too are told by the adults in their lives that they are too young to have responsibility for themselves, too ignorant to know how to handle it; for children, the victory of young, dumb, powerless people over their smarter, more powerful betters must still be as satisfying as it was hundred of years ago for European peasants.

Of course, the story doesn't admit that Cinderella is dumb. It merely says she's good, and therefore obviously deserves a prince. The same is true of all these heroes and heroines, even the Dukes. It's part of the wish-fulfillment of such stories that people who think they are good are, in fact and unquestionably, good, that bad guys know they are bad and revel in their badness, that goodness does get rewarded, and that brainy self-seekers get incarcerated, trampled, bent, mutilated, or cooked. Despite their passive thoughtlessness, the fact that fairy tale and TV heroes and heroines are supposed to deserve their rewards makes them surprisingly similar to the glorious heroes of romance and mythology. In *The Hero of a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell shows how the central characters of numerous legends from around the world are all special, all different from lesser people, all better in exactly the same wonderful way; and according to Northrop Frye, "in romance, heroes are brave, heroines beautiful, villains villainous, and the frustrations, ambiguities, and embarrassments of ordinary life are made little of." For Frye, the world in which heroes and heroines exist is an idealized world, a world seen by eyes which accept surface appearances and question nothing—the same world that's seen by the blithely innocent eyes of fairy tale and TV heroes and heroines, and the world we assume children imagine our own actual world to be when we call them innocent.

For that reason, we might expect the heroes and heroines of the books children love to be like those standardized glorious beings of romance and mythology and Saturday morning TV. After all, if children are childlike, that is, innocent, then they should enjoy reading about people as good, as beautiful, as perfect, and as rightfully rewarded as they apparently assume

good, beautiful and perfect people are in the real world. The heroes and heroines of the great books for children ought to be Olympians. Or Supermen. Or even Duke boys. They ought to be so perfect that they have no character at all—for what is character but the various unique ways in which we all diverge from our ideals of human behavior?

The heroes and heroines of many of the less enduring books are often exactly that perfect. And children do love these books, as they love fairy tales, and as they love Duke boys. But they don't love them for long. At the back of a faded girl's novel I picked up from a table of discards, I found advertisements for other books published by the same house, and learned, for the first time, of the once immense popularity of some heroines that have long been forgotten. There was Honey Bunch, "a dainty, thoughtful little girl, and to know her is to take her to your heart at once."

At once, but apparently not at twice or thrice. There was also Mary Jane, with "her good nature, her abounding interest in her friends and surroundings." There was Patty, "the lovable girl whose beauty and frank good nature lend charm to her varied adventures." They are all wonderful, all flawless, and all forgotten.

Not far removed from perfectly marvelous Mary Jane and perfectly pleasant Patty is perfectly perspicacious Nancy Drew, who keeps on being outrageously popular with the young girls of my home city even *after* our highminded public librarians pursed their lips and refused to replace her when she got too worn to circulate. Nancy would have approved of their concern about her meeting the public in tatters; from her hygienic point of view, the main point of her father's vast riches is that they let her indulge her fetish for dry cleaning and maniacal color coordination. In *The Secret of Shadow Ranch* Nancy changes her clothes constantly, going from an "olive green knitted suit with matching shoes and beige accessories," to "a yellow blouse and skirt with a matching pullover," to "a powder blue sweater and skirt." She's always clean, always color coordinated, and always on the lookout for ungrammatical middle-aged males who need shaves and some dry cleaning and who do dirty deeds. In Nancy's world, the villain is always old and male and hairy and ungrammatical; and Nancy's ability to put such disgusting creatures behind bars where they belong makes her a wonderful role model for girls who sense their adult selves looming ahead of them, and who are frightened enough by what they sense to want to keep on believing it's dirty and improper; the young men Nancy befriends are always as clean and unhairly as she is herself.

But they're not nearly so terrific. In the few short pages of *The Secret of Shadow Ranch*, Nancy is worshipped in all the following different ways:

"It was wonderful the way you held the car on the road," said Bess (To Nancy, of course).

Later:

"Oh Nancy," she exclaimed. "You were wonderful. You saved us."

Later:

"You're a remarkable detective, young lady. Keep up the good work."

Later:

"We made it safely!" Alice cried in relief. "Oh Nancy, how can we ever thank you?"

Later:

"You're a downright marvel, that's what you are, young lady!" Alice squeezed her father's hand: "Everything has turned out happily."

"Thanks to Nancy Drew," Mr. Roger smiled.

And if that weren't enough, she also makes "scrumptious" cakes. Someday this girl is going to make some hairless demigod a wonderful wife.

And that, of course, is the point. Nancy is nothing but marvelous, just like Mary Jane and Patty. These are the people we like to imagine ourselves to be in our idlest of daydreams: people better than, richer than, happier than ourselves; people for whom everything works out well, people for whom there are always happy endings. The idealized world that so gratefully rewards them for just being perfect no matter what represents an innocence even the youngest of children has already lost, doesn't really miss, but sometimes mourns for.

But not too deeply, and not too often. Mary Jane has been forgotten; I suspect Nancy would have been too, if it had not been for the wonderful merchandising that made her what she is today. Nancy's simply too good to be interesting; one reason why there can be so many slightly different mysteries about unshaven middle-aged men for her to get involved in is that any given one of them simply isn't compelling enough to read more than once. In any case, the thrill is in her doing just what her young readers expect her to do, no matter what strange new experience she encounters—in her resolutely inhuman and utterly predictable refusal to be changed or even slightly influenced by anything that happens to her. Nancy develops in character because she's perfect already.

Similarly, while all of Louisa May Alcott's "little women" and even Alcott herself profess deep admiration for the perfectly good and perfectly characterless Beth, the women I've asked about it all tell me that, when they were young, the March sister they really cared for was Jo. Beth did know kindness, cooking, cleanliness, and color-coordination; but I don't think it's an accident that she's the one that dies, because she's certainly the most expendable of the Marches. Jo's clothes were always dirty and ill-matched, and she was self-centered, and Alcott spends a lot of time telling us about Jo's troubles in the kitchen. Jo may be a bit weird, something you could never accuse her sister Beth or Nancy Drew of; but her weirdness makes her imperfect enough to be human, just like the rest of us.

Anne of *Green Gables* has troubles in the kitchen too. She makes a cake with liniment in it. And that's not the only mistake she makes; her childhood is a saga of disasters, all different, all funny, but all pointing out

yet once more how unequipped Anne is to be the perfect heroine of her own daydreams. She is not good enough, not capable enough, not even pretty enough. Mary Jane and Nancy and Beth beat her out in every category you can think of. And girls have been reading about her inadequacies and rejoicing in them for years.

And yet. An important "and yet." In the long run, Anne Shirley does exactly what Mary Jane does. She comes to a new place and she brings happiness with her. Through the wonderworking joyfulness of her ebullient personality, her friends get everything they wished for but knew to be impossible. Anne makes Marilla happy, and she makes her laugh, and she softens every hardhearted person in the immediate vicinity. That she does so suggests an important paradox about the memorable characters of great children's books. They are not perfect, like the less memorable characters of less great children's books; but the same perfectly wonderful things happen to them, the same satisfyingly exciting adventures and the same satisfyingly happy endings, as happen to those less memorable characters. The memorable characters are almost always imposters: mercinadequate people like you and me who find themselves in the stories of heroes.

In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrup Frye distinguishes between two important types of characters: the *eiron*, the self-effacing speaker of truth, and the *alazon*, the self-centered imposter of hypocrite. For Frye, the traditional heroism of the heroes of romances and of comedies with happy endings makes them into *eirons*: they are modest, they are brave, and they are right, and that's why they have happy endings. Meanwhile, tragic heroes, who tend to trust themselves too much, or to misunderstand the world they live in and therefore must suffer, are *alazons*.

Now Peter Rabbit and Ann of Green Gables and Jim Hawkins of my own favorite children's classic, *Treasure Island*, are not tragic heroes. But if they have anything in common, it's their lack of heroic perfection. They aren't very good, and they aren't very pretty, and they would all look silly in Danskins. If anything, they are *alazons*, imposters, people who've got caught up in the sort of events that always happen to heroes in romances or adventures, and who therefore ought to be heroic, but who somehow never seem quite able to manage it.

You'll recall that Asa told me how The Greatest American Hero crashed into a train. The Greatest American Hero is an imposter. It seems that a bunch of little green men came down in a space ship and left him a wonderful suit that gives him super strength and the ability to fly—sort of, for he can't quite control the suit. But after he flies into things and the dust has cleared, it always turns out that he's saved the day after all.

So does Anne Shirley. Her hair is too red, her freckles too vivid, her arms too boney, to engender the kind of admiration Nancy Drew gets; Nancy would take one look at Anne and send her off to Elizabeth Arden's or One-Hour Martinizing for a day, to learn how to look like the heroine of a novel. For that's the role she's called upon to play; Anne is the happiness-

bringing angel despite her unangelic appearance. We get both to laugh at her because she's not perfect and to adore her because she does the same things perfect heroines manage. And that delicious ambiguity in our reaction to her is, I think, what makes us want to read about her again and again and again. Think how much less insufferable Nancy Drew would be with carrot-red hair instead of Titian locks; we might not want to imagine ourselves like her, simply because we already *are* like her, flawed, if not by bad hair then by an inevitable something else. But the less we wanted to be like her, the more we might simply like her—and be glad when she accomplished great things, not merely awed by her inevitable marvelousness. We might even cheer when the carrot top is eventually transformed into, guess what, Titian locks, just as Anne's is.

In Ballantynes *The Coral Island*, once a favorite with boys but now mostly unread, three boys are shipwrecked on an island, and do what shipwrecked people usually do: they create paradise by using everything they can think of for some purpose other than the one for which it was intended. As Jack says, "we have no lack of material here to make us comfortable, if we are only clever enough to use it." Boy, are they clever enough. Jack himself, their ringleader, is one of the most annoyingly wonderful people I've ever read about. "Jack Martin was a tall, strapping, broad-shouldered youth of eighteen, with a handsome, good-humored, firm face. He had a good education, was clever and hearty and lion-like in his action, but mild and quiet in his disposition. . . besides his being older and much stronger and taller than either of us (this is Jack's cohort Ralph talking), he was a very clever fellow and I think would have induced people much older than himself to choose him for their leader, especially if they required to be led on a bold enterprise." As for swimming, Jack "was superior to any Englishman I ever saw." In general, Jack "was ever the most active and diligent," and Ralph tells us "we had implicit confidence in Jack's courage and wisdom" and "we owed much of our rapid success to the unflagging energy of Jack." It's no wonder that, when they find the ship captain's boots washed up on the shore,

Peterkin immediately put them on, but they were so large that, as Jack said, they would have done for boots, trousers, and vest too. I also tried them, but, although I was long enough in the legs for them, they were much too large in the feet for me; so we handed them to Jack, who was anxious to make me keep them, but as they fitted his large limbs and feet as if they had been made for him, I would not hear of it, so he consented at last to use them.

It seems that even Jack's feet were born for leadership. It's a wonder he doesn't have Titian locks. In the long run, Jack turns out to be so terrific that, Ralph admits, "Peterkin and I were so much in the habit of trusting everything to Jack that we had fallen into the way of not considering things, especially such things as were under Jack's care." But it doesn't matter; for it turns out in the long run that they *can* leave things under Jack's care.

William Golding's response to all this boring perfection is not particularly surprising: it was *Lord of the Flies*, a novel in which another group of boys shipwrecked on an island turn out to be not quite so wonderful nor so thoroughly civilized, and in which the particular Jack in question displays the ugly Fascistic underside of the exact same qualities of leadership:

Jack was on his feet.

"We'll have rules!" he cried excitedly. "Lots of rules! Then when anyone breaks 'em—"

"Whee-oh!"

Wacco!"

"Bong!"

"Doink!"

When Golding's Ralph eventually asks, "Why do things break up like they do," he gets the right answer: "'I dunno, Ralph, I expect it's him.' 'Jack?' 'Jack.'"

In *The Coral Island*, Ralph Rover tells how, before his shipwreck, he loved to hear "wild adventures in foreign lands." In *Treasure Island*, Jim Hawkins tells how, before his adventure, he was "full of sea dreams and the most charming anticipations of strange islands and adventures." Well, Ralph goes on to have lots of wild adventures; but for all his constantly professed Christianity, for all his constantly professed hatred of the violent savagery and cannibalism he finds so fascinating that he can't seem to stop talking about it, Ralph never loses his love of interesting places and strenuous action. But when Jim Hawkins speaks of his anticipation of strange adventures, he quickly adds, "In all my fancies nothing occurred to me quite so strange and tragic as our actual adventures." "Tragic" is an interesting word; after actually having been on *Treasure Island*, Jim Hawkins can find nothing good to say about it, or pirates, or adventures. In retrospect, and as unlikely as his behavior on the island makes it seem, he claims that "from the first look onward, I hated the very thought of *Treasure Island*." And finally, he says, "Oxen and wain-ropes would not bring me back to that accursed island." Jim wants us to know he's changed his mind, learned from his bad experiences; yet for all his gloomy I-told-you-so's, all his dampening of the spirits of adventure, the story Jim tells is a lot more interesting than the story the enthusiastic Ralph Rover tells. Why?

I think the answer is that Jim's sour grapes make him an inadequate hero: another imposter. As the hero of an adventure, there are three things he ought to be able to do. He ought to be able to believe that what he does is right, and he ought to be able to enjoy doing it, and he ought to do it very well indeed. Now the young Jim the adventures of *Treasure Island* actually happen to manages all three; but Stevenson cleverly gives us another Jim Hawkins also, the older one who tells the story. And this other Jim constantly tries to undermine our enthusiasm for his younger self's actions.

The younger Jim tells the pirates about what a terrific hero he's been: "if you want to know who did it. . . it was I. I was in the apple barrel the night we sighted land. . . and as for the schooner, it was I who cut her cable, I who killed the men aboard her." But the older Jim interprets the exact same events quite differently, sees them as evidence of youthful rashness and thoughtlessness and ignorance: "I was full of folly, if you like." In saying things like that, this older Jim announces himself as an inadequate hero; anyone who makes such sanctimonious comments about the stupidity of being adventurous surely doesn't belong in an adventure. But he also *does* make his point: what allowed the younger Jim to become a hero was nothing truly great nor admirable, but mere folly, mere human weakness. He was simply not good enough nor great enough. He was inadequate.

Now I assume that most readers respond to the older Jim's sanctimonious superiority to his younger self the same way I do: we'd like him to just shut up. If we're reading this book, then we're reading it because we *like* pirates and adventures, and we aren't going to have much patience with someone telling us how foolish such things are. In fact, I suspect it's our rejection of the older Jim's spoilsport attitudes that lets us enjoy and embrace the younger Jim's folly so wholeheartedly; we like the inadequate rash kid better than the boring prig he grew up into. Furthermore, and like the apparently inadequate Anne at Green Gables, Jim *does* end up saving the day in *Treasure Island*, and as his older self points out, he does it by being rash and foolish. In both books we have it both ways at once: the thrill of adventure and romance and happy endings as accomplished by perfectly unheroic, perfectly normal people like you and me.

Anne and Jim aren't the only imposters in the great children's books. The most memorable magician in children's literature is that big fake the Wizard of Oz. Winnie the Pooh is *not* a real bear. In Wonderland, Alice's most memorable companions are secretly a bunch of playing cards and games pieces, and they constantly assume that Alice herself is somebody she never claimed to be. As for animals, the most interesting ones are usually doing a not-quite-adequate job of pretending to be human, so that their animality makes them fail as humans and their humanity makes them fail as animals. Peter Rabbit disobeys his mother, whose values are those of human mothers, by doing something that comes quite naturally to rabbits: stealing from a vegetable garden. Not surprisingly, therefore, he can only escape from the garden *after* he loses the human clothes that tripped him up—by acting like a natural rabbit. But for acting like a rabbit, he gets sick like a human; and his sisters, rabbits who happily acted like unrabbity people, get the human reward of a sweet dessert. Peter Rabbit is memorable because it's so hard to decide whether we should condemn his rabbitness or his humanity, his wanting carrots or his disobeying mother. As a strange mixture of person and bunny, he is inadequately either—as much an imposter as Anne Shirley or Jim Hawkins.

In fact, Peter has much in common with Anne and Jim. He gets into trouble by taking on more than he turns out to be capable of doing; he is forced to acknowledge that he is less wise and less obedient than he ought to have been, even though he does triumph in the end. And there is also the fact of Peter's mere rabbit presence in the time-worn story of the great hero, the story of leaving the safety of home, being tested by difficulty and coming home again that Joseph Campbell finds throughout the myths and legends of all human civilizations. That Peter's cute face—and Anne Shirley's cute face, and Jim Hawkins's earnest one—should be some of the thousand faces of the hero with a thousand faces—that raises the great central issue of children's literature: the difficult problem of choosing whether it is better to act like a child, or like a grownup—like the creature you actually are and on the instincts you naturally have, or like the creature they tell you you should be and that your society finds more acceptable—like a bunny (or perhaps a spontaneous girl or a rash, unthinking boy) or like a hero. Ironically, Peter and Anne and Jim all turn out to be heroes because they act on their unheroic instincts. Anne comes to be loved for her unrestrained and mostly unsocialized imagination, ebullience, and spontaneity, Jim wins the treasure by frecklessness and folly, and Peter escapes Mr. McGregor by acting on rabbit instincts rather than on human logic. So again it turns out that the heroes of children's literature are just ordinary folks, people and bunnies with failings, brainless princes and princesses and Duke boys, who find themselves enmeshed in the adventures of heroes and who achieve heroic ends not by becoming heroic but because of their very lack of heroism.

In a recent issue of *Maclean's*, my country's slavish imitation of *Time* and *Newsweek*, the movie critic Lawrence O'Toole tried to explain why certain characters in recent movies have become so popular:

Perhaps, the most beloved creatures of all time, aside from E. T., are the robots C3PO and R2D2 from *Star Wars* and Yoda from *The Empire Strikes Back*. What they share with E. T. are qualities that are decidedly human. It is a safe bet to say that audiences respond, ultimately, to the personality created and not to the mechanical effect. Long after the opticals are forgotten, the characters will be remembered.

I think it's half right. Yes, all those electronic marvels masquerading as living creatures are memorable for their humanity. But what makes them human is not so much their eccentricity as it is their noticeable lack of success in being the creatures they try so hard to ape: ourselves. The robots of *Star Wars* act like humans, but they don't quite bring it off. They're still mechanical. And the edge of alienness in the movements and voices of Yoda and E. T. makes them only *almost* human. They get close, but it's their ultimate lack of success that makes them cute and that makes us love them. In fact, all these creatures are like children, at those times in the lives of children that we call them *cute*: when they imitate adult behavior and don't quite bring it off, or when they wear adult clothing and look just a little silly in it; or when they try to pronounce hard words, and don't succeed.

It's the noticeable division between intention and execution that makes such behavior cute; that makes the humanity-aping of the *Star Wars* robots or the beer-drinking E. T., or even of Curious George, so endearing; and also, I think, that endears us to the heroes of the great books for children. Peter and Anne and Jim try hard to be the heroes their stories demand; but it's their not quite doing it the right way that makes us take them to our hearts. Playing at being heroes, imposters in their own heroic stories, they are all charmingly inadequate.

They are, in fact, and as Northrop Frye's categories suggest, the sort of characters we usually find at the center of tragedies: people who attempt great things because they believe they are superior to others, because they think they are or wish they were more than they actually are, because they think the rules don't or ought not to apply to them—people with an innocent egocentricity, a conviction of their own marvelousness or rightness or goodness.

Unlike the heroes of tragedies, the imposters of children's literature accomplish the great things they attempt. They have happy endings. Even so, their lives do follow something of the usual pattern of tragedies. Like the great heroes of tragedy, Jim, Anne, Peter—and Winnie the Pooh, and Wilbur the Pig, and just about all the other great characters of children's literature but Peter Pan, who makes a big point of it—all lose their innocence, and all gain both humility and a greater insight into the uninnocent ugliness of the world they actually live in. They might all say, with Shakespeare's *Lear*, "They told me I was everything; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof."

Because we, as adults, are ourselves not innocent, we see the gaining of this new-found knowledge as a *happy* ending; and indeed, it is almost always presented as such. But the great children's books all express a sadness, a tragic acceptance of one's inevitable limitations that implies emotions more complex than mere unadulterated happiness. By the end of *Good Wives*, Louisa May Alcott's little women have come to be content with a lot less than they once thought they deserved; and in fact, the theme of that depressing book is the gradual diminishing of their glorious expectations. Jim Hawkins learns that the exotic places he dreamed of were actually hellholes. Anne finds happiness, she claims, in *not* going away to school. Peter Rabbit finds happiness in merely getting back to the home he was eager to get away from in the beginning. All the imposters, the would-be heroes, learn to give up their imposture and accept their humanity.

Stories about heroes and heroines *are* exciting. Heroes and heroines, I mean the genuine, glorious, heroic thing, are indeed wonderful. But most children aren't themselves wonderful, no more wonderful than most adults are. While I was thinking about this talk, I made a list of the common characteristics of heroes and heroines; and I suddenly realized that it almost directly contradicted my assumptions about the nature of real children. Heroes are brave, but many children are afraid of the dark. Heroes are self-

effacing, and children, in this post-Piagetian time of ours, allowably egocentric. Heroes are muscular; children are little, and loved for being so. Heroes are wise, children unlearned; heroes are competent, and children unthinking. Whether or not children actually are this inadequate—and surely not—we certainly do like to tell them they are. Reading of the great deeds of truly heroic beings must do much, therefore, to confirm their feelings of inadequacy. Not surprisingly, then, the heroes they love best and longest are creatures as unheroic as themselves who do great things anyway—people who both express and triumph over their own inevitable confusion about whether it's better to be the losers naturally are or to become heroes grownups seem to want them to become—people like The Greatest American Hero, or the lethargic Snow White, or the doltish Duke boys, or the unrabbity rabbit Peter, or the silly girl Anne, or the rash boy Jim.

At least one of my children knows that. After Asa told me about how heroes save people's lives, he thought about it a little more, and then he said, "Oh, I forgot one thing. Some heroes have freckles." He was right. Some do. Anne of Green Gables does, and there's no reason to believe that Jim Hawkins doesn't; in Dennis Lee's poem on the subject, even Peter Rabbit "turned into a spotted goon/ Because he would not use a spoon." But far more significant, far more revealing, is that fact that Asa, the greatest Canadian Asa, Asa who can leap high curbs in a single bound and reduce his younger sister Alice to tears with a single blow, the one and only Asa, has freckles himself.